POETS, SATIRISTS AND LITERARY CRITICS

Max as a Grecian Urn

THE WORKS OF MAX BEERBOHM. With a Bibliography by John Lane. John Lane Company.
MORE. By Max Beerbohm. John Lane Company.

HERE are two finely printed little volumes of uniform make-up, reprints of those twin masterpieces of youthful genius doggedly determined to wonder at nothing and take the consequences—"The Works of Max Beerbohm" and "More," by the same gifted arranger of flowers of language in becoming nosegays. Now, this is a considerable incident in the publishing business.

Inexorable, irrevocable Time has flown since 1895-1899, when those titles first irradiated Vigo street with their soft illumination quite as actually, even if with much show of artifice, as Mr. Pickwick's benignant face irradiated Goswell street when he threw up his window sash at Mrs. Bardell's and gazed out upon a welcoming (if unconscious) world so long before. Even then, on the brink of "this so-called twentieth century" (as the curate said), that same world looked indescribably old and finished to Max, the punctilious torch-bearer, whose sensitive spirit was wrung with the inaudible rustle of every falling leaf; even then he felt the evanescence of all things registered, minute by minute, in his own blood and bones. What ineffable pathos sounded through the calm, brave sentences of "Diminuendo"—words of Socratic tranquillity: "Once I wrote a little. . . . But the stress of creation soon overwhelmed me. Only Art with a capital H gives any consolations to her henchmen. And I, who crave no knighthood, shall write no more. Already I feel myself to be a trifle outmoded. I belong to the Beardsley period. Younger men, with months of activity before them, with fresher schemes and notions, with newer enthusiasm, have pressed forward since then. *Cedo junioribus.* Indeed I stand aside with no regret. For to be outmoded is to be a classic, if one has written well. . . ."

It is worth noting that these words of parting were dated at Chicago, fit arena for the *nunc dimittis*, in 1895, of this quiet soul. It is well, indeed, that we cannot look forward over the way our feet are to go. Figure the emotions which would have convulsed that reed shaken in the lake winds if he could have foreseen the day when his publisher should issue a Jubilee Edition of The Works of Max Beerbohm. And yet the twenty-five years which have rolled over his polished head surely have passed for him like a watch in the night, and each new day has dawned smilingly upon the world that gains continually some mellowness from his gentle persistence in living to adorn it, in kindly villeity, with yet another wreath of tolerant acceptance of its changing ways.

For Max is now not only torch-bearer but flamen, not only a pillar of fire but a whole burning bush, not only an eminent contemporary but a great tapestry of literature steadily receding into classic perspective, not only among those present but a priceless heritage from a gentler, more hand-made and less mechanistic and clattering past, when people did not write by machinery. Indeed, he comes near to being our avatar of that Grecian urn from which life's incense still rises. Compared with Mr. Wells (say) Max has not written so much; surely we may think of him as a

foster child of silence and slow Time

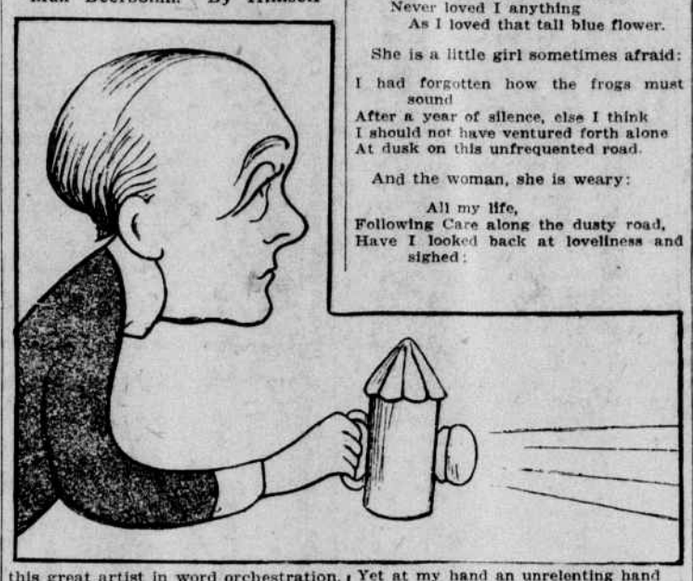
whose graceful outlines still serve to display for our behoof "what men or gods? . . . What maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

We cannot be too grateful to him for his stout service, or yeoman or knightly, in steadfast defence of what we still call the English language. He knows how to write it trippingly upon the pen, and he is not afraid sometimes to grant us one of his unusual words, or to let himself go. Yet not so frequently since the Victorian period has sunk fairly out of sight does he call upon us to "dance and be glad and trip the cockawhoop," and for this reason Mr. Lane is to be thanked for the new editions, because the earlier books have long since been read to tatters (or shrined in cabinets) and a whole new generation has come along with their mouths open who have—probably—never felt the thrill sent down the spinal cord by (for instance) his indignant moaning at the deadening influence of Walter Pater. He saw Pater in an Oxford bookshop, and was shocked, naturally, at the way he dressed; and touching his style: "Not that even in the more decadent days of my childhood did I admire the man as a stylist. Even then I was angry that he should treat English as a dead language, bored by that sedulous ritual wherewith he laid out every sentence as in a shroud—hanging, like a widower, long over its marmoreal beauty or ever he could lay it at length in his book, its sepulchre."

Such beams shine out from these earlier pieces which are now once more cast before the public contemplation at (as must be confessed) a risky time. But regret for probable thickheadedness of individuals should not stifle the joy that these youthful intimations of authority are once more to be made accessible to the undeserving poor. How gentle is his manner, how stern his moral in self-judgment! In his memories of school days he remarks: "Not that I had any special reason for hating school. Strange as it may seem to my readers, I was not unpopular there. I was a modest, good-humored boy. It is Oxford that has made me insufferable."

The name of Oxford calls out all the glory of counterpoint in the score of

Max Beerbohm. By Himself



this great artist in word orchestration, who is also almost the only living literary heir of Pope. No matter how large an order this may seem, you will find, I think, that Max has the goods in stock. With all reverent homage to Emmanuel Burden, Zuleika Dobson is no less incarnate *Buddh*. As they used to say of Pope and Dryden: "If one flies higher, the other continues longer on the wing." The artistic delicacy of Mr. Belloc's etching does not slant at the colored crayons in Max Beerbohm's gorgeous cartoon. And as we turn through these earlier pages we understand how Zuleika became possible. Portents of mastery glitter all through them. What prescience in the "Defence of Cosmetics"! And in his study of the abysm of "1880," what indulgence could be nobler than his sigh: "There is always something rather absurd about the past!"

WINFIELD SCOTT MOODY.

"Do Not Let Me Die"

SECOND APRIL. By Edna St. Vincent Millay. Mitchell Kennerly.

WHAT more can be said of Edna St. Vincent Millay than that she's feminine? This, perhaps, and perhaps superfluously: She is lyrical, she is emotional, she is young. Oh! young, above all things—young in impetuosity, in fluctuation, in being able to get excited.

Oh, I laughed, I cried, to see!
All my heart became a tear,
All my soul became a tower.
Never loved I anything
As I loved that tall blue flower.

She is a little girl sometimes afraid:

I had forgotten how the frogs must sound
After a year of silence, else I think
I should not have ventured forth alone
At dusk on this unfrequented road.

And the woman, she is weary:

All my life,
Following Care along the dusty road,
Have I looked back at loveliness and sighed;
Yet at my hand an unrelenting hand
Tugged ever, and I passed. All my life long
Over my shoulder have I looked at peace,
And now I fain would lie in this long grass
And close my eyes.

She is brave, marching "yet onward!"

To sound the name Millay brings to mind the million variations the daughter of Eve is heir to.

Thus when I swear "I love with all my heart"
'Tis with the heart of Lilith that I swear.

. . . . .

No matter what I say,
All that I really love
Is the rain that flattens in the bay
And the eel grass in the cove.

How can one take her seriously, coquette, Pierrette, that she is?

My heart is warm with the friends I make,
And better friends I'll not be knowing,
Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take,
No matter where it's a going."

No sooner is that said than issues the declaration:

Mine is a body that should die at sea.
And have for a grave, instead of a grave
Six feet deep and the length of me,
All the water that is under the wave!

"I am waylaid by Beauty," she cries in "Assault." In "Spring" is the antipathy:

Beauty is not enough. . . .
It is not enough that yearly down this hill
April comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.

Plainly Edna Millay is seeking, as every poet must. What?

I chase your colored phantom on the air,
And sob and curse and fall and weep and rise,
And stumble pitifully on to where
Miserable and lost, with stinging eyes,
Once more I clasp—and there is nothing there.

Yet even so, beauty is fulfilled in a thousand ways for her and she has written some lovely things out of her experience of nature. From "City Trees" this verse is one of them:

The trees along this city street,
Save for the traffic and the trains,
Would make a sound as thin and sweet
As trees in country lanes.

"The Blue-Flag in the Bog" ranks with "Renascence" as a piece of American poetry. Music does not come only from the banks of the Avon, nor did rhyme with reason pass with the Parnassiens.

On the windless hills of Heaven,
That I have no wish to see,
White, eternal lilies stand,
By a lake of ebony.

It was God who walked ahead,
Like a shepherd to the fold;
In his footsteps fared the weak
And the weary and the old.

Glad enough of gladness over,
Ready for the peace to be,
But a thing God had forgotten
Was the growing bones of me.

"The Bean-Stalk" gallops—"What a wind! What a morning!"

Edna Millay is very humble with it all:

Oh, there will pass with your great passing
Little of beauty not your own,
Only the light from common water,
Only the grace from simple stone.

We cannot refuse her poet's plea. If we would, we could not.

Lift this little book,
Turn the tattered pages;
Read me, do not let me die,
Search the fading letters, finding
Steadfast in the broken binding
All that once was I.

Boys and girls that lie
Whispering in the hedges,
Do not let me die,
Mix me with your pledges.

Do not let me die,
Farmers at your raking,
While the sun is high,
While the hay is making.

Women at your toil,
Women at your leisure
Till the kettle boil,
Snatch of me your pleasure.

Women quiet with your weeping,
Lest you wake a workman sleeping,
Mix me with your grief!

. . . . .

Read me, margin me with scrawling,
Do not let me die!

Edna Millay is not a coming American poet. She has arrived. Like Aldrich, she will sing forever. She is with us now and it is hard to judge her. Yet in measuring the worth of a poet the test is in the reader's unsuccessful attempt to abolish the melodies that linger interminably and leap intermittently into his head. When you catch yourself continually going along the street humming a tune that is irrefutably identified as Millay, the composer's eminence is unquestionable.

C. BLYTHE SHERWOOD.

Dryden Was Master of Varied Verse

THE POETRY OF JOHN DRYDEN. By Mark Van Doren. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

OF all the great English poets none has been more neglected than John Dryden. "When he died in 1700 the generalissimo of English verse," observes Prof. Van Doren, "it seemed certain to the survivors that the momentum of his name would keep his works forever rolling abreast of the centuries. But before a single century had passed he had begun to live rather in the stiffness than in the strength of his eminence; and another century saw him laid carefully away among the heroes."

We of the twentieth century are perhaps far removed from the atmosphere in which Dryden wrote, yet much of him has a strangely modern ring, for we too live in an era that is more critical than romantic, more national than ecstatic; and in the satires and ratiocinative verse of Dryden will be found much that echoes the spirit of our own day. He did not wait for inspiration; he deliberately went in search of it, and much of his best work is on purely casual themes, topics of the moment that called forth from within him resources of thought that went deeper than the subject demanded, and hence invested his occasional pieces with the stuff of permanence. It was a failing of the age to expect "that everything, whether important or not, should be said importantly"; and consequently much of Dryden's verse is so ill adapted to its purpose as to give the impression of a great viaduct suspended over a two foot creek.

Yet when the subject really demanded eloquence Dryden responded masterfully. In fact, "he carried eloquence as high as it can go in poetry"; he "has no equal in prayers, objurgations, politic addresses and speeches of defiance; he wears the robes that he has borrowed from the orator with a splendid assurance; his accents, though they too are borrowed, ring true."

Perhaps more than any other writer before or since he has proved the variety of uses to which poetry is capable of being applied; he has extended it into fields into which others would not dare to venture, and in the realm of rational or argumentative poetry he occupies a unique and unapproached position. Even to the poet of the present Dryden should stand as testimony that verse need not be confined strictly to lyric or narrative forms, but that it may be employed as a wide ranging instrument for the transmission of thought.

The lyrics have shown the strongest tendency to endure, and certain of them, such as the famous "Alexander's Feast" and the odes for St. Cecilia's Day, have attained a secure place among the English classics. However, Prof. Van Doren expresses doubts as to whether some of the satires, such as "Absalom and Achitophel," are not better poetry; and it appears certain that the fullest expression of Dryden's genius is to be found in his satirical and reflective verse.

STANTON A. COBLENTZ.

E. Phillips Oppenheim, author of "The Great Impersonation" (Little, Brown), which has now reached its thirteenth printing, is planning a visit to the United States next year.

Henry James, Critic of Epictetus, Trollope and Hugo

NOTES AND REVIEWS. By Henry James. With a Preface by Pierre de Chaignon la Rose. Cambridge, Mass.: Dunster House Bookshop.

M. PIERRE DE CHAIGNON LA ROSE writes this Cambridgesque bit in the preface to these sacred "Notes and Reviews": "Nowadays, unfortunately, *in America at least*, one must discriminate between the art of literary criticism and the trade of book reviewing. In general, it (we suppose the "trade") is so abysmally and notoriously beneath contempt that it is scarcely worth while to mention the fact."

Just why, under the circumstances, M. la Rose bothers mentioning it we cannot fathom. Such oratory might well be reserved for a worthier cause. He could hardly have considered it necessary to indulge in such wholesale disdain of reviewing of today so that, by contrast, he might more easily add a superfluous pompom to the fully and finely feathered cap of that Master of yesterday. If so, we would remind M. la Rose that Henry James, himself, with that same "supremely endearing 'fineness' " which M. la Rose apparently appreciates so much, would have been the first to disapprove. We believe that Henry James was impatient with superficiality and with stupidity. We hazard the guess, however, that any species of contempt would have found no place with him, leastwise that for the menial "trade" of book reviewing. Else why the magnanimous Mr. Vereker, and the subtleties of Mr. Corvick and the reverent young reviewer who relates the story of "The Figure in the Carpet"? We do not wish to offend, but like the Henry James of these "Notes and Reviews" we are "young" and "healthy." Ergo, we too enjoy "roasting." However, we are also "worth our salt," and so we readily forgive M. la Rose his thoughtless generalization because of his otherwise thoroughly helpful, enjoyable preface, and his profound appreciation of Henry James.

The twenty-five papers collected in this volume—a treasure by way of paper, printing and binding—are a series of unsigned book reviews which were published in the *Nation* and in the *North American Review* during the years 1864, 1865 and 1866. We perceive that even then he had independent opinions and expressed them freely.

To us none of the papers are of such singular interest as that on "Epictetus," with its consequent philosophic discussion of Stoicism. For was not Henry James preeminently a biographer of intellectual Stoics? Mary Garland and Fleda Vetch, Fanny Knocker and Milly Theale, Nick Dormer and Rowland Mallet, together with a host of others, recall a prodigious Stoicism of soul that found its expression in a knowing silence.

It is a singular revelation of the elder Henry James to listen to the youth calling Stoicism a "system of morals, because it is in effect nothing of a philosophy. It is a stifling of philosophy, a prohibition of inquiry. It declares a man's happiness to be wholly in his own hands, to be identical with the strength of his will, to consist in a certain *parti-pris* of self-control, steadfastly maintained. It teaches the absolute supremacy of virtue—its superiority to health, riches, honor and prosperity. Virtue consists in a state of moral satisfaction with those things which reason tells us are in our power, and in a sublime independence of those things which are not in our power."

Be it said for James that he recognized the dangers of Stoicism, its deliberate perversity, its paralysis of all those finer sensibilities that make for progress. He recognized, also, that it only succeeded in "simplifying human troubles by ignoring half of them," and he attaches value to the Discourses, not for the philosophy which he maintains is not theirs, but for their revelation of the *character* of Epictetus. "Intellectually he was no genius. . . . He was simply a moralist: he had a genius for virtue." So with great sanity, and remarkable sagacity for one so young, James suggests eclecticism:

"The good a man does the world depends as much on the way the world takes him as on the way he offers himself. . . . Let us take what suits us, and leave what does not suit us. There is no doubt but we shall find much to our purpose; for we still suffer, and as long as we suffer we must act a part."

Here we cannot refrain from recalling "The Portrait of a Lady."

It is interesting to advert to some other criticisms of James which bear more directly upon the work of contemporary novelists. Strangely enough he is continually calling attention to faulty technique. He admonishes them to work less hastily—to write, scratch out and rewrite; to let their puppets speak for themselves, and, above all, to hold fast to their idea, if they have one. With few exceptions his youthful judgments have well withstood the test of time. One of these exceptions is Anthony Trollope. James is singularly harsh in his estimate of Trollope, although, as M. la Rose mentions, he ultimately modified this judgment. Another possible exception is Charles Reade, whom James regards "as the most readable of living English novelists."

George Eliot's novels "have none of the inspiration, the heat nor the essential simplicity" of masterpieces. James would classify them with the novels of Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen, admitting, nevertheless, that George Eliot "is stronger in degree than either of these writers." He prefers her "low-life to her high-life." And, Maggie Tulliver excepted, her men and women reveal "little genuine *passion*." All this apropos of "Felix Holt," which, "as a story is singularly inartistic," but displays "much power, much brilliancy and much discretion."

Mrs. Gaskell's genius is "little else than a peculiar play of her personal character." "Wives and Daughters" is the "best" of her tales, apart from "Cranford," which James believed was "destined to become a classic."

Dumas's "Affaire Clémenceau," though depressing and suggestive of cynicism, is so "severely executed" that its "writing is reading for men."

James regrets the fact that "Les Travailleurs de la Mer" was "written exclusively from the *head*," because he has an "enormous respect for M. Victor Hugo's heart." And he would seem to be exceedingly annoyed with Miss Prescott, the author of "Azarian," not only because she is verbose, possessing, "like the majority of *female* writers, the fatal gift of fluency," but because she is forever fussing with the externals of her characters:

"It is an injustice to men and women to assume that the fleshly element carries such weight. In the history of a loving and breaking heart, is that the only thing worth noticing? Are the external signs and accidents of passion the only points to be detailed? What we want is Passion's self—her language, her ringing voice, her gait, the presentment of her deeds. What do we care about the beauty of a man or woman in comparison with their humanity?"

No form of writing portrays the *character* of an author better than criticism. Henry James apprehended this in the case of that relentless critic Epictetus, as do we in the case of James the reviewer. He says of Mlle. de Guérin's quiet reaction to Paris, "She had changed her sky, but she did not change her mind." In the light of these "Notes and Reviews" let the faithful reader judge to what extent changed skies ever changed James's mind!

MILDRED BLUMENTHAL.

American Verse Since 1830

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY. By Louis Untermeyer. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

EVERY once in a while appears some new volume to proclaim that the poetic renascence in America is no merely accidental or fugitive phenomenon, but a genuine literary reflorescence in which are many of the hues of permanence. If the works of the poets themselves were not sufficient testimony to this fact, the critical volumes and anthologies would be; and unmistakable evidence of the poetic rebirth might be found in the essays of writers such as Marguerite Wilkinson, John Livingston Lowes, Amy Lowell and Louis Untermeyer.

Among these, not the least notable is Mr. Untermeyer. In his "New Era in American Poetry" he has traced the principal poetic currents of the times; in "Modern American Poetry," of which a revised and enlarged edition has just been issued, he supplements his previous work by a selection of almost three hundred poems from ninety-eight contemporary or near-contemporary authors. Arbitrarily placing the boundary line so as to include only poets born in 1830 or thereafter, Mr. Untermeyer commences with Emily Dickinson and proceeds from her through such conventional versifiers as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Sidney Lanier and Edwin Markham down to the Imagists and the ultra-modernists as represented by Alfred Kreymborg, Maxwell Bodenheim and Ezra Pound. Each author is introduced by a brief biographical sketch and by a critical preface in which his work is succinctly characterized; and the book is lent unity and point by an essay on the influences in operation in American poetry since the appearance of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

If any criticism is to be launched against the volume as a whole it must be on the ground that it assumes a distinctly partisan attitude and places undue emphasis on the works of writers of the *vers libre* school. It is Mr. Untermeyer's contention that American poetry has been undergoing a gradual evolution which finds its most complete fruition in the works of the Imagists; and because the Imagistic work represents the culmination of the tendencies of several decades he seems to assume that it is the highest development in present day poetry.

It is to be expected that in choosing from so extensive a field he should have omitted some writers of genuine merit; and one notes with regret that the names of Hermann Hagedorn, Jessie Rittenhouse and Cale Young Rice are not even mentioned. It is to be expected, likewise, that some of the critic's comments upon the authors should impress one as mistaken; and while Mr. Untermeyer's remarks are usually acute and discriminating, they occasionally fall through being too brief and too comprehensive, as when he at one stroke condemns the poetry of George Sterling as "flamboyant and rhetorical," and thereby stigmatizes many simple and smooth flowing lyrics, and that majestic, original and imaginative, if too prolix, poem, "The Testimony of the Suns."

But while one may disagree as to the details, one must admit that on the whole Mr. Untermeyer's anthology is a notable one. He has gathered together many excellent poems from widely diverse sources; he has made his volume vast in range and generally high in standard; he has included all variety of verse, from love sonnets to satirical jingles; and if occasionally he seems to have selected a poem too cheap in tone or to have favored writers of a particular school there is no denying that the collection as a whole is representative of the best in present day American poetry.